

2022

**THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

TENTH ASSEMBLY

**Next Steps for Our Kids
2022-2030**

**Presented by
Rachel Stephen-Smith MLA
Minister for Families and Community Services
June 2022**



Next Steps for Our Kids

2022-2030

JUNE 2022



ACT strategy for strengthening families and
keeping children and young people safe



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The ACT Government acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as traditional custodians of the Canberra region and that the region is also an important meeting place and significant to other Aboriginal groups. The ACT Government respects the continuing culture, and the contribution that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples make to the life of this city and surrounding region.

The ACT Government would also like to acknowledge, the value of traditional parenting practices and communal culture in child rearing. In particular, grandparents, aunts and uncles, hold a significant and respected position in families and play an important role in the development of a child or young person's sense of identity, belonging and culture. We believe that the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is a strength and protective factor in our work with families. We also understand that for thousands of years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, families and communities have provided safe, strong and loving care for their children, based on cultural wisdom, shared knowledge and traditions which uphold the belief that children have a sacred value to their community.

THANK YOU

The ACT Government would like to thank the children and young people, families, carers and service providers who gave their time to provide feedback on the strategy. Their words and experiences will be used to improve the lives of children and young people in the years ahead.

ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

The ACT Government is committed to making its information, services, events and venues as accessible as possible. If you have difficulty reading a standard printed document and would like to receive this publication in another format, such as large print or audio, please telephone 13 3427.

If English is not your first language and you require a translating and interpreting service, please telephone Access Canberra on 13 2281.

If you are deaf, or have a hearing or speech impairment and need the telephone typewriter (TTY) service, please phone 13 3677 and ask for 13 3427. For speak and listen users, please phone 1300 555 727 and ask for 13 3427. For more information on these services visit contact us through the National Relay Service: www.relayservice.gov.au.

CONTENTS

My message	5	Next Steps for Our Kids 2022-2030	16
Executive summary	7	What is the scope and vision of <i>Next Steps</i> ?	16
Introduction	10	What will be the guiding principles?	17
Background	11	What will <i>Next Steps</i> deliver?	18
What was <i>A Step Up</i> ?	11	What will <i>Next Steps</i> focus on?	20
<i>A Step Up</i> implementation	14	Domains and priority initiatives	22
What does the data show about <i>A Step Up for Our Kids</i> ?	15	Reporting progress and evaluation	37
		Conclusion	38

My message

Over the past six years, through the delivery of *A Step Up for Our Kids Out of Home Care Strategy 2015–2020*, the ACT Government has made significant achievements in building a more responsive, high functioning, evidence based out of home care system. The implementation of *A Step Up* has resulted in a marked change in the way the ACT supports families and children and young people at risk of entering out of home care. We have increased the stability of children and young people in care, placed a greater emphasis on the incredible work of carers and helped many young people transition to adulthood.

However, as is the case in all Australian jurisdictions, there remain significant challenges in how our child and youth protection service system works with and for children, young people, families and carers. We know we need to do more to support families and to keep children and young people safe at home. Where this is not possible, we know some things must change to ensure children and young people can thrive in out of home care, supported by carers who have confidence and trust in the system. This new strategy—*Next Steps for Our Kids 2022–2030 (Next Steps)*—aims to address many of the issues and challenges continuing to affect children, young people, families, carers, child and youth protection practitioners and our partners across government and in the non-government sector.

In March 2021, I convened the Child and Family Services Reform Forum to bring together key perspectives among government and non-government agencies with a focus on some of these ongoing challenges. In line with the feedback from this forum, *Next Steps* represents an ambitious reform agenda with a focus on more universal service delivery and the provision of earlier support to families in need.

One of the most important priorities for *Next Steps* is to reduce the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people interacting with the statutory child protection



and youth justice systems. We continue to see an unacceptable overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in our statutory services and we will work with the community to support self-determination and embed culturally safe practice in the work of child and youth protection, in line with the recommendations of the *Our Booris, Our Way* review.

Next Steps was developed using extensive evaluative data, contemporary research and feedback we heard from people with lived experience of the system.

I want to thank all the children, young people, families, carers, advocates, services, staff and directorates who have contributed to the development of *Next Steps*, especially those who openly shared their personal experiences. Your voices have broadened our understanding and will help improve the futures of Canberra's most vulnerable children and young people.

Rachel Stephen-Smith

Minister for Families and Community Services
June 2022

Executive summary

Child and youth protection is inherently complex. Fundamentally, it is a system involving one group of people making decisions about the lives of other people—children and young people, their families and carers. These decisions are often difficult and fraught with emotion. The children, young people and their families involved are some of the most vulnerable in our community and many parents have their own history of trauma, abuse and neglect. People are further traumatised by their engagement with the system—not just children, young people and birth families, but also carers, advocates, child protection workers, staff in non-government organisations and those who report suspected abuse and neglect.

Next Steps is for all these people. It builds on our previous Out of Home Care Strategy, *A Step Up for Our Kids (A Step Up)* and broadens its reach across the child and youth protection system. *Next Steps* sits alongside other local and national strategies and reviews that are aimed at building a stronger, fairer and more effective service system to support children, young people and their families and carers.

Our ambitious agenda also builds on an evolving evidence base and on what we have heard from our own community about what works in supporting children, young people and families with complex lives. It recognises the immense challenge of reform in child and youth protection and seeks to engage everyone who has a role to play in keeping children, young people and their families safe and supported. It recognises success will require doing things differently, both in policy and practice.

The vision for *Next Steps* extends the vision of *A Step Up* and reflects the agreement of all Australian Community Services Ministers under *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for*

Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031 and the feedback we have heard. This vision is:

Children and young people in the ACT are safe, strong, connected and living their best life.

Our goal is that every child and young person:

- feels safe and loved
- has the material basics they need
- is connected to family, culture, identity and community
- is connected to learning
- has their physical and psychological health needs met
- has the opportunity to participate and have their voice heard.

In developing *Next Steps*, we have been guided by a set of principles to reflect our commitment to Canberra as an inclusive, fair and restorative community where everyone feels valued and has their rights and dignity upheld. The strategy seeks to ensure the ACT's child and youth protection system is:

- child, youth and family centred
- evidence led
- restorative
- dignity driven
- trauma responsive
- culturally safe
- disability informed
- accountable.

Where *A Step Up* sought to address challenges at a system level, *Next Steps* explicitly recognises the challenges experienced by those who come into contact with child and youth protection. We have heard that we need to be upfront in acknowledging these issues as a first step to building trust with the community whose engagement is needed to help address them. The strategy's six domains or focus areas reflect people's experiences of the child and youth protection practice and the challenges faced by the system itself.



1 Our Booris, Our Way: The ACT continues to see unacceptable overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in out of home care. In 2017, the ACT Government commissioned a wholly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led review to look at the experiences of First Nations families in the ACT child and youth protection system. The final report of *Our Booris, Our Way* was completed in 2019. While work is underway to implement the 28 recommendations and eight sub-recommendations, there is much more to do. As a comprehensive strategy, it is important that *Next Steps* recognises this challenge. The work will continue to be led and overseen by the *Our Booris, Our Way* Implementation Oversight Committee. The other five domains also reflect the themes of the review. Improving the system for all children, young people and their families will support the specific work to implement the *Our Booris, Our Way* recommendations.

2 Trust and transparency: We have heard that the power imbalance between people who work in the system and those who become engaged with it (children and young people, parents, carers, advocates and other government and non-government services) is exacerbated by the complexity of the statutory system; poor access to information; and a lack of trust. Despite considerable oversight and public reporting, the child and youth protection system is regularly described as lacking transparency and accountability. *Next Steps* will do more to improve decision making, engagement and transparency and to empower children, young people, families and carers.

3 Strengthening families: Families told us they need to feel safe to ask for help and to be able to access support before risks escalate. This domain is expanded from *A Step Up* to recognise the need for earlier support. Where *A Step Up* focused on early intervention and prevention for high risk families at the edge of care—and saw success in reducing the number of children entering care—*Next Steps* is focused on earlier support for families while their children are very young or when problems emerge.

4 Trauma responsive and restorative practice: As a nation, we are becoming more informed about the impact of trauma on people’s lives and behaviours. *A Step Up* had an overarching goal of creating a therapeutic, trauma informed system of out of home care, with a focus on therapeutic assessments, plans and supports for children and young people and training for carers and workers. *Next Steps* recognises that trauma pervades the child and youth protection system. It also acknowledges that parents and carers can demonstrate incredible strength and resilience to care for children when the right supports are in place. Experience around the world has shown that better outcomes are achieved by working restoratively—that is, working respectfully with families and carers to help them identify and achieve their goals rather than disempowering them by doing things to or for them.

5 Partnering with the community: Families, community sector service providers and other ACT Government agencies have told us that the current service system is fragmented. With the number of child concern reports increasing every year, pathways to supports need to be improved. Funding arrangements need to reflect a joined-up system of child, youth and family services operating with a shared practice framework. We need to use the expertise of children and young people, parents and carers with lived experience to help improve service models, policies and practice.

6 Continuum of support: *A Step Up* introduced the concept of a continuum of care for children and young people in out of home care. *Next Steps* acknowledges some of the initiatives under this domain worked better than others and that some children and young people continue to experience poor outcomes from their engagement with child and youth protection. *Next Steps* focuses on supporting smoother life transitions for children and young people within and exiting care—including further extending access to support for young people aged 18 to 21 years. For those young people most at risk, *Next Steps* recognises the need for intensive wraparound case management, therapeutic residential care and step-down supports.

Under each focus area, the ACT Government has identified three priority initiatives (see **Table 1** below). These are major pieces of work and many are already underway. There are also dozens of other actions required to deliver the *Next Steps* vision. While this strategy outlines many of these, a new Ministerial Council will be appointed to support the process of co-designing a four year action plan in 2022. This process will be critical in demonstrating the ACT Government’s commitment to partnering with people with lived experience and the community to identify and deliver actions and outcomes.

Table 1: Next Steps—domains and priority initiatives

<p>OUR BOORIS, OUR WAY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCO) and transition responsibility for case management • Establish an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People Commissioner • Fully embed the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle in legislation, policy and practice 	<p>TRUST AND TRANSPARENCY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish best practice internal and external decision review processes • Modernise the <i>Children and Young People Act 2008</i> to align with contemporary practice and support better information sharing • New Charters of Rights for Parents and Families and for Carers, building on the existing Charter of Rights for Children and Young People
<p>STRENGTHENING FAMILIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a wellbeing focused process for child concern reporting to improve early referral and access for families to natural and community based supports • Ensure commissioning for the Children Youth and Family Support Program supports better outcomes for families at risk • Increase access to pre-natal and early parenting support for parents at risk of engagement with child protection 	<p>TRAUMA RESPONSIVE AND RESTORATIVE PRACTICE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embed family led decision making, including Family Group Conferencing for all families where desired and appropriate • Invest in training in restorative and trauma responsive approaches for child and youth protection workers and community partners • Establish an intensive trauma recovery service for adolescents and young adults
<p>PARTNERING WITH THE COMMUNITY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a new Ministerial Council that includes community partners and elevates the voices of people with lived experience • Build common assessment frameworks and tools between Child and Youth Protection Services (CYPS) and non-government organisations working with children, young people and families • Ensure all care services operate as Child Safe Organisations 	<p>CONTINUUM OF SUPPORT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extend the provision of care to any young person seeking this until 21 years of age • Establish a multi-disciplinary intensive case management service for young people who are putting themselves and others at risk • Strengthen therapeutic residential care and models of support for young people with significant trauma behaviours

The first part of this document provides background on how the ACT’s child and youth protection system has changed since *A Step Up* was launched in 2015, what has been achieved and the ongoing and emerging challenges. The next section further describes the principles underpinning this strategy, while the following sections provide more detail on the six domains—what has been done to date, what the evidence tells us, what we have heard from our community and what will happen next.

Introduction

Next Steps for Our Kids (Next Steps) sets out an ambitious reform agenda building on the positive outcomes seen through the implementation of the previous A Step Up for Our Kids Strategy (A Step Up) and address the continuing challenges seen in the child and youth protection system. Next Steps is an evolution of A Step Up and will see various original elements matured, extended and expanded.

The intent of A Step Up was bold, but key stakeholder feedback and evidence in the evaluation outcomes and research show that there is more work required for the statutory child protection and out of home care system to build on the changes made to date. This is not surprising in the context of a complex, 24/7 system undergoing extensive reform. Changes need time to mature and stakeholders have expressed support for the development of a framework to provide long-term direction and continue to build on reform.

Next Steps is a longer-term strategy, setting out clear priorities for the next eight years, drawing a link between what has been achieved through A Step Up, the continuing challenges facing the system, the voices of lived experience and the contemporary evidence base.

Next Steps sets out the principles, priorities and reform elements to be used to drive change into the future. To support the implementation of Next Steps, we will co-design a series of action plans with service users, government and non-government organisations to determine how the work will be achieved and in what order. This is where the detailed planning on actions will occur, recognising that the success of our reform effort requires collective participation and commitment.

This implementation approach recognises that reforms need to be dynamic, responsive to evolving challenges and will take time to mature. The approach ensures the Next Steps reforms remain current and contemporary over the life of the strategy.

This document provides reference to key background information and data and is supported by several appendices where the reader can source further detailed information.

Background

What was A Step Up?

A Step Up was launched in January 2015 and saw a significant shift in the way the ACT Government and community sector organisations provided out of home care services to children, young people, their families and carers.

It was developed in response to continuing challenges in out of home care at the time including:

- increasing numbers of children and young people entering and remaining in care
- the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in care
- poor life outcomes for many care leavers
- a difficulty in obtaining foster carers
- the need to create a more financially sustainable system.

A Step Up was based on significant evidence based research and stakeholder engagement and was supported by an initial investment of \$16 million for the implementation and sustainability of new initiatives. The primary focus of A Step Up was to support families so children and young people could remain safely living at home; where they had entered care, they could be safely returned home; and if they were unable to return home, they were provided with permanent long-term living arrangements.

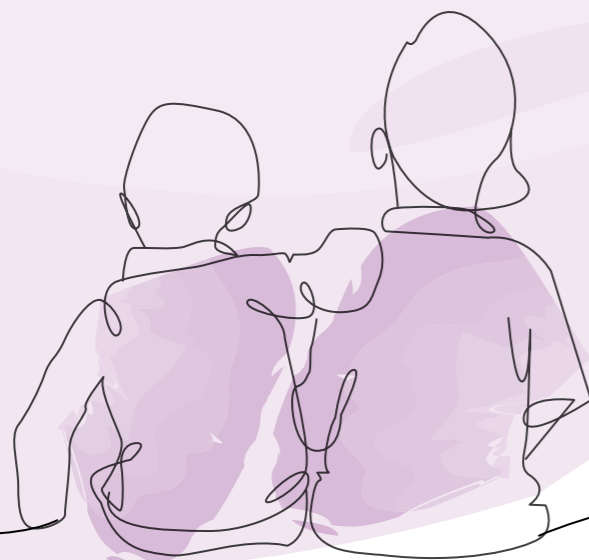
The intention of A Step Up was to improve outcomes for children and young people in care by providing more flexible, therapeutic, trauma informed, child focused services and to reduce the demand for out of home care places. It also committed statutory child protection and out of home care services to hearing the voice of the child or young person, better understanding their needs and providing personalised services that could be scaled up and down in intensity as the child or young person's needs changed over time.

A Step Up guided the delivery of out of home care services in the ACT from 2015–20 with many external services starting from 2016. It delivered a continuum of care that was divided into three domains and 29 individual elements. The domains were underpinned by a therapeutic trauma informed service system and focused on:

- 1 Strengthening high risk families.
- 2 Creating a continuum of care.
- 3 Strengthening accountability and ensuring a high functioning care system.

Table 2 outlines the domains and key elements where change was being driven under A Step Up.

One of the most important elements in this reform was the introduction of intensive family support and preservation services through Uniting Children and Families ACT. In 2016, this represented a significant increase in investment in early intervention and prevention services in the ACT. Further investments have since been made in intensive family services, particularly the introduction of Functional Family Therapy—first for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families through Gugan Gulwan Youth Aboriginal Corporation in partnership with OzChild and subsequently within the ACT Together contract to support restoration.



In addition, the way the ACT Government procured out of home care services changed significantly under *A Step Up*, with a single consortium providing a 'continuum of care' for a flat fee per child or young person in care. Under this arrangement, ACT Together, led by Barnardos Australia, provides short- and long-term foster care, long-term kinship care, case management of children and young people on long-term orders, foster and kinship carer assessments, restoration support, long-term planning, contact services, permanency assessments, residential care, the Community Adolescent Program (CAP) and post-care support. This change was aimed at embedding therapeutic care and providing greater continuity of support by ensuring that responsibility for the child or young person's experience of care resides with one service provider.

Other key elements of the service system introduced or enhanced under *A Step Up* were:

- Karinya House—supports mothers and their young babies in a 24 hour supervised and supported environment or in an outreach capacity.
- CREATE Foundation—provides the Children and Young People Engagement Support Service for children and young people who are in the care system, or who have left the care system, through events and activities.
- The Australian Red Cross Birth Family Advocacy Support Service—provides independent information and support to parents with children in care, or with children at risk of entering care, to help them understand and participate in child protection processes.
- Carers ACT Foster and Kinship Carer Advocacy Service—provides independent advocacy support services to kinship and foster carers.

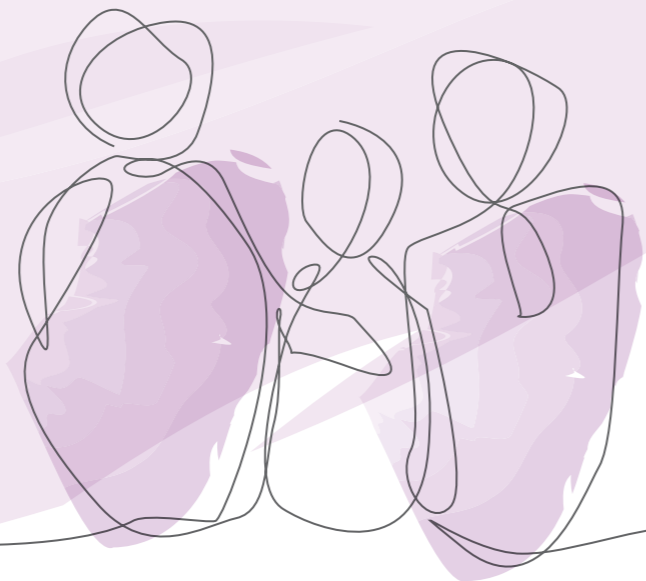


Table 2: Original *A Step Up for Our Kids* service elements

DOMAIN ONE	STRENGTHENING HIGH RISK FAMILIES
ELEMENTS	1.1 Placement prevention
	1.2 Reunification
	1.3 Mother and baby unit
	1.4 Supported supervised contact of children and young people with their families
	1.5 Parent-child interaction programs
DOMAIN TWO	CREATING A CONTINUUM OF CARE
ELEMENTS	2.1 Empowering children and young people in care
	2.2 Continuum of care
	2.3 Case management
	2.4 Outsourcing of kinship care for children and young people on long-term orders
	2.5 Revised arrangements for reimbursement of carers
	2.6 Supports for permanency
	2.7 Extended continuum of care for care leavers up to 21 years of age
	2.8 Salaried foster care
	2.9 Therapeutic residential model
	2.10 Independent advice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people
	2.11 Child Health Passport
	2.12 Joint Education and Training Pathways Initiative
DOMAIN THREE	STRENGTHENING ACCOUNTABILITY AND ENSURING A HIGH FUNCTIONING CARE SYSTEM
ELEMENTS	3.1 Refreshed governance arrangements
	3.2 Accreditation and monitoring scheme
	3.3 Strengthened contract management
	3.4 Performance based contracting
	3.5 Adoption of the Out of Home Care Standards
	3.6 Renewal of carer approvals
	3.7 Improved information management
	3.8 Independent carer advocacy and support service
	3.9 Independent family advocacy and support service
DOMAIN FOUR	THERAPEUTIC TRAUMA INFORMED SYSTEM
ELEMENTS	4.1 Therapeutic assessment and plans
	4.2 Trauma Recovery Service—Melaleuca Place
	4.3 Training in trauma informed care

A Step Up implementation

Over the seven years since the launch of *A Step Up* there have been achievements under each of the domains. One of the most noteworthy outcomes has been the reduction in numbers of children and young people entering and remaining in out of home care. Figure 1 below outlines the predicted numbers of children and young people who would have been living in out of home care in the absence of the initiatives implemented under *A Step Up*.

According to this modelling, on 30 June 2021, the ACT could have expected 986 children and young people to be living in out of home care. The impact of the reform has meant 817 children and young people were living in out of home care on this date—169 fewer than projected.

Read more: *A Step Up for Our Kids journey* which looks at what we did and what we learnt from *A Step Up for Our Kids Out of Home Care Strategy 2015–2022*. Available from the Community Services Directorate website: www.communityservices.act.gov.au.

Moving forward from the implementation of *A Step Up* there continues to be challenges for the government and community providers in supporting children, young people and families with high and complex needs. The government has sought to understand the challenges by conducting several robust evaluations of the outcomes achieved through *A Step Up* and has continued to engage with key stakeholders to understand the impact of the reforms on people who use the services. There has also been an ongoing commitment to review and refine policy based on contemporary research into best practice in child protection.

Read more: The evidence used to inform the development of *Next Steps* can be found in *Review of Contemporary Practice in Out of Home Care*. This looks at what others are doing and what we can learn from this. Available from the Community Services Directorate website: www.communityservices.act.gov.au.

Figure 1: Impact of the *A Step Up* on numbers of children and young people living in out of home care in the ACT



Predicted and actual numbers of children and young people living in out of home care in the ACT. Projections are from modelling conducted in 2018, actuals are from *Report on Government Services 2021*, all numbers are on 30 June.



What does the data show about *A Step Up for Our Kids*?

From its commencement, the ACT Government has monitored and reported on the progress and performance of the out of home care system under *A Step Up*. The system was evaluated at a baseline, mid and final point and six-monthly reports have been provided to the ACT Legislative Assembly. These evaluations and reports have delivered a solid evidence base to inform *Next Steps*.

The evidence identifies several positive changes since the implementation of *A Step Up*. Many changes speak to success, but others highlight the challenges that need to be the focus of ongoing reform efforts.

The outcomes in terms of data and numbers since the implementation of *A Step Up* in 2015 are summarised below.

- The number of children, young people and families receiving family support services has increased.
- The number of children and young people entering out of home care has decreased.
- The decreasing numbers of children and young people entering out of home care and the steady rate of children and young people leaving out of home care, has stemmed the prior trend for year on year increases in the number of children and young people living in out of home care in the ACT.
- The age profile of children and young people entering and living in out of home care has changed, with fewer children under the age of five entering care and more children and young people in out of home care aged over ten years old.
- The proportion of children and young people living in out of home care who have higher levels of behavioural complexity and support needs has significantly increased.

- The number of children and young people leaving out of home care has remained relatively stable.
- Placement types for children and young people living in out of home care have remained relatively stable, with most children and young people living with their families in kinship care.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people continue to be significantly over represented, constituting almost one in three children and young people living in out of home care, compared to one in 10 children and young people living in the ACT. The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people entering out of home care has been decreasing year on year for the 2017–18 to 2018–19 financial years. Since 2019–20 there has been an increase in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children entering care compared to the 2018–19 financial year.
- Continued gaps in educational and other life outcomes for children and young people living in and leaving out of home care.
- The numbers of children and young people accessing legal permanency options and different types of care have not changed since 2016, with the rate at which Adoption or Enduring Parental Responsibility Orders are issued and the placement of children and young people in either kinship, foster or residential care, remaining steady over time.

For more information about the data to inform *Next Steps* please refer to the post strategy evaluation of *A Step Up*. Available from the Community Services Directorate website: www.communityservices.act.gov.au.

Next Steps for Our Kids 2022–2030

What is the scope and vision of *Next Steps*?

Children and young people in the ACT are safe, strong, connected and living their best life.

Next Steps captures a vision for an ACT child protection system which places the needs of children and young people at the centre of its mission and prioritises their best interests as the paramount consideration in decision making. It includes an integration of earlier family support, prevention, child protection, out of home care and youth justice and seeks to strengthen families who interact with this system.

There is clear evidence that families' needs are best met earlier in the life of a problem and are more sustained if they use a family's natural resources such as their extended family or community networks. Reflecting this early support approach, the scope of *Next Steps* is broader than that of *A Step Up* to include support for families at the edge of the child protection system. As well as continuing to centre on addressing the needs of children, young people and families who are involved with the statutory child protection and/or out of home care system, *Next Steps* will focus on those families at risk of engagement with these systems.

Next Steps provides clarity and accountability on the next eight years of reform for those who are involved in the child and youth protection system and those who engage with it, including:

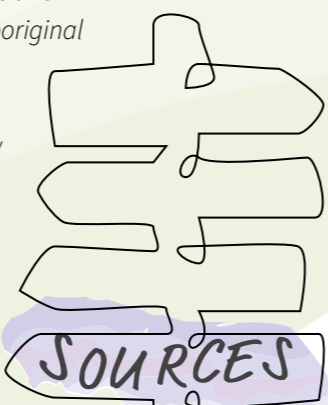
- children and young people
- birth families
- kinship carers
- foster carers
- mandatory and voluntary reporters
- child and youth protection professionals
- out of home care providers and their staff
- other non-government organisations and their staff, for example youth homelessness, domestic and family violence and mental health services

- ACT Government human services agencies, including health, education and justice
- advocates
- legal representatives
- academic and expert partners.

Next Steps complements work on youth justice reform to support the needs of young people at risk of entry and already within, the ACT youth justice system. *Next Steps* supports efforts to divert young people from custody, address recidivism and provide appropriate referral to early support, noting the ongoing work to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility in the ACT and the demand for alternative service responses this will create. *Next Steps* will support an integrated service response for children, young people and their families.

We acknowledge that to prevent, support and transition children and young people and their families away from the statutory child protection system, *Next Steps* needs to align closely with other reform commitments and initiatives, including the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement (2019–2028)*, *Our Booris, Our Way Review Final Report (2019)*, *Set Up for Success—An Early Childhood Strategy for the ACT (2020)*, *ACT Carers Strategy 2018–2028* and the ACT Government's commitment to a *First 1,000 Days Strategy*.

Read more: *Sources—References and useful resources that guide our work*. Available from the Community Services Directorate website: www.communityservices.act.gov.au.



What will be the guiding principles?

Next Steps is guided by a set of shared principles that will set the tone for how ACT Government agencies interact with service partners and with people accessing support services.

Child, youth and family centred

In implementing *Next Steps* we will ensure all aspects of the service system are sensitive and responsive to the needs of children, young people and their families. The voices of children, young people and families will be central in decision making. We will require services to focus on the safety and wellbeing needs of children and young people in the context of their families and build on families' strengths to achieve positive outcomes.

Evidence led

Next Steps draws an evolving evidence base about best practice in child and youth protection and early family support. In implementing *Next Steps*, we will require services to use evidence informed and an evidence building approach to improving outcomes for children, young people, families and carers.

Restorative

Restorative practice recognises that relationships are central to our wellbeing. Where relationships are valued, problems are solved jointly and every person is treated with respect, care and dignity. These relationships are with children and young people, with their parents and carers and between service providers. Restorative practices are underpinned by respectful partnering relationships which are maintained through shared and accountable decision making. Restorative behaviour management practices are important to the delivery of residential care and youth justice services that are trauma informed and therapeutically focused.

Dignity driven

Dignity driven practice understands the importance of individual agency and focuses on recognising and supporting the actions of children, young people and their families to resist violence, oppression, suffering or harm. It supports families and carers to be part of decision making in a way that doesn't increase their vulnerabilities.

Trauma informed

Care that is trauma informed and therapeutically focused recognises that children in the out of home care system are affected by significant or cumulative trauma. It also recognises that parents and carers often have their own experience of trauma and that interacting with the statutory child protection system can create further trauma for families, carers and those who work in the sector or support families engaged with it.

Culturally safe

Next Steps recognises that cultural safety requires strategic and institutional reform to remove barriers to the health, wellbeing and safety of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including supporting self-determination through family led decision making. The further development and engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled services—as recommended under *Our Booris, Our Way*—is vital to building a culturally safe system for First Nations families, children and young people.

Disability informed

Under *Next Steps*, child and youth protection and commissioned services will take a strengths based approach to working with children, young people, birth families and carers with disability and people experiencing mental health challenges.

Accountable

Transparency and accountability help build trust in government services. While agreement will not always be reached when complex and difficult decisions are being made about the best interests of children, everyone involved should experience the process as fair and transparent. Building on existing accountability through oversight agencies, *Next Steps* will increase transparency in decision making in partnership with those agencies and commissioned services.

Next Steps recognises that the *Human Rights Act 2004* underpins all reforms and the day-to-day decision making to ensure there is appropriate consideration of how decisions affecting children and young people impact on their human rights.

What will *Next Steps* deliver?

For children and young people:

Regular opportunities to be heard

Greater inclusion in decision making

Trauma informed care experiences

Therapeutic care environments

Greater support for life transitions

Access to extended care for young people aged 18 to 21 years

For families:

A Charter of Rights for Parents and Families

Earlier support to keep their family together

Domestic and family violence informed and responsive service provision

Culturally safe service provision

Access to family led decision making

Support to engage with legal processes

Timely restoration and family finding

Information in easy English and other languages

For carers:

Greater opportunities to be heard

Greater inclusion in shared decision making

Increased support for their own wellbeing

Better access to information and advocacy

Increased access to training

Consistency in carer approval and renewal processes

Enhanced supports to work closely with birth families towards restoration and improved family involvement

For the system:

A restorative approach embedded at all stages

A trauma informed service sector

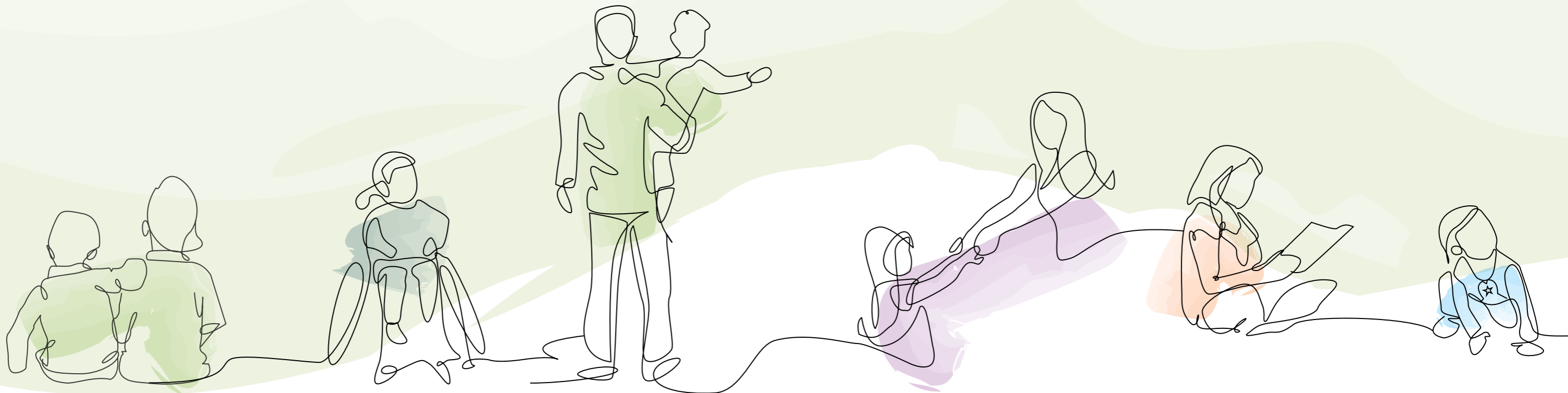
A skilled, supported and disability informed workforce working in culturally safe ways

A continuum of joined-up, evidence based support services

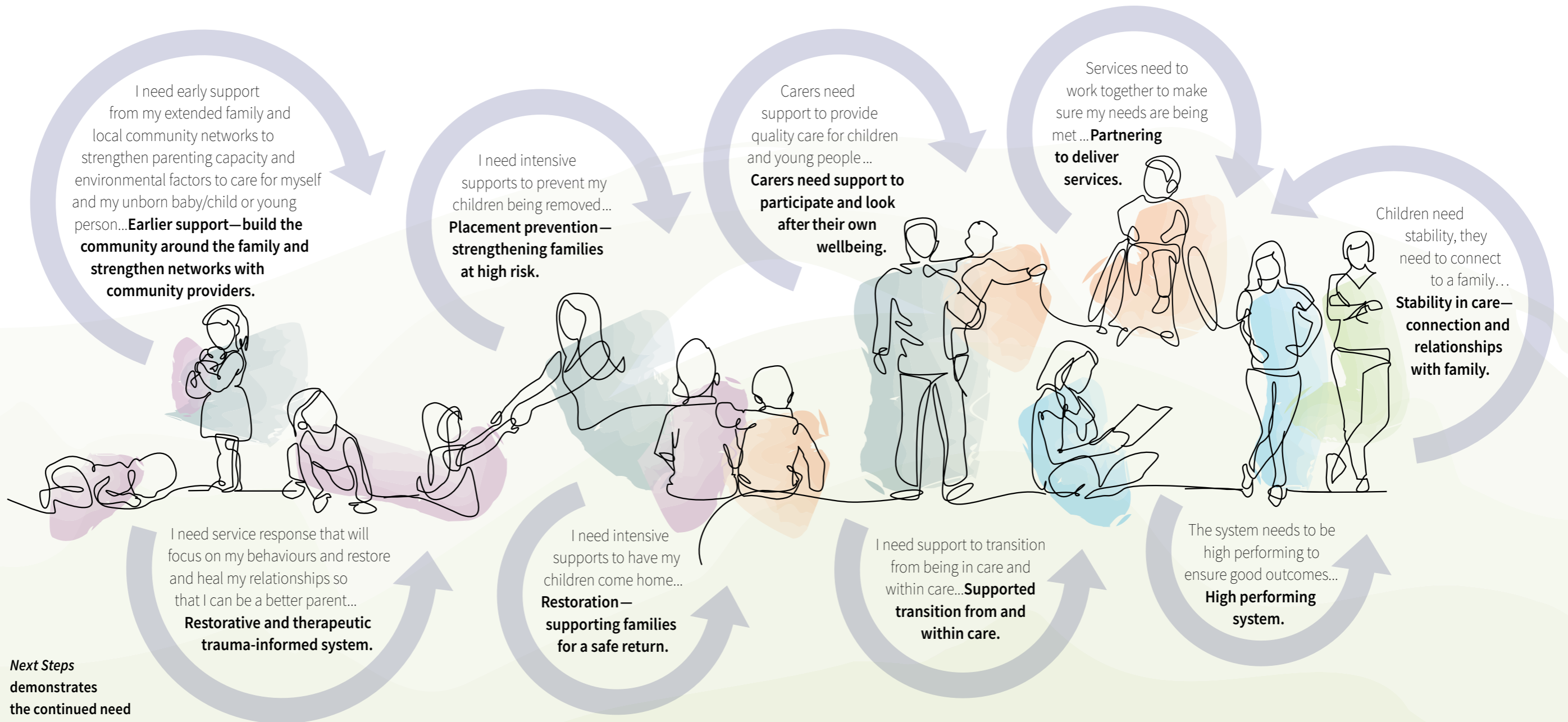
Establishment and/or development of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs)

Co-design in new program development and implementation

Ongoing reporting against meaningful outcomes for children and families



What will *Next Steps* focus on?



Next Steps demonstrates the continued need for government and non-government agencies to focus significant effort on building stronger families to prevent statutory child protection involvement and ensuring families coming into contact with child protection have the best possible outcomes.

As shown in the visual above, *Next Steps* provides a comprehensive approach to how government, non-government and the wider community work together. This starts with earlier support for families and with an integrated service system that can effectively respond when families need it. Children and young people remain the central focus.

Next Steps comprises a comprehensive set of new service initiatives and reform actions which have been grouped under six domains.

The six domains underpinning *Next Steps* are an evolution of the four outlined in *A Step Up* and reflect the changing landscape between the *A Step Up* and *Next Steps*. The initiatives and actions under the six domains will be achieved over the course of the next eight years. These include a set of priority initiatives to set the reforms up for success.

The six domains acknowledge the challenges experienced by those who come into contact with child and youth protection as well as the challenges faced by the system itself. These domains are:

- 1 Our Booris, Our Way**—a systemic response to address the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families.
- 2 Trust and transparency**—improved decision making, engagement and review processes.
- 3 Strengthening families**—earlier support for families and an ongoing commitment to preservation and restoration.
- 4 Trauma responsive and restorative practice**—working respectfully with children, young people, families and carers for better outcomes.
- 5 Partnering with the community**—ensuring a joined-up system of child, youth and family services.
- 6 Continuum of support**—working together to ensure children and young people get the right support at the right time for smoother life transitions.

Domains and priority initiatives

1. OUR BOORIS, OUR WAY

There continues to be an unacceptable number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people engaged with statutory child protection services. This is mirrored across other states and territories and continues despite multiple reviews and recommendations to better support families and community.

Our Booris, Our Way was a wholly Aboriginal-led review of the experiences and overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in the child protection system. This domain focuses on ensuring all 28 recommendations and eight sub-recommendations from the *Our Booris, Our Way Final Report* are fully realised as intended.

Progress to date

The work to address the recommendations of *Our Booris Our Way* has been underway since the first interim report was received in 2018. The ACT Government has committed a total of \$15.7 million from 2018–19 to 2023–24 to support implementation of the recommendations. Actions to date include:

- new funding for Gugan Gulwan Youth Aboriginal Corporation, in partnership with OzChild, to offer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families coming into contact with the child and youth protection services, access to the Functional Family Therapy—Child Welfare program
- the establishment of Family Group Conferencing to help divert Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people from the court system and to support family led decision making
- implementation of locally delivered cultural competency training for CYPs staff
- commencement of a co-design process to establish a new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children’s Commissioner, with interim

arrangements for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families Advocate to support children, young people and families while the co-design process is underway

- the engagement of the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) to support the development of practice guides to embed the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Placement Principle in statutory child protection work and support the delivery of training to CYPs staff
- structural, policy, practice and data reporting changes within the Community Services Directorate (CSD) to better understand the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families remains a priority
- establishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Co-Design Network and the Ngura Naraganabang (Safety in the Pouch) Advisory Group to help guide policy and practice improvement and resource development for practitioners working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families
- foundational work to support the establishment of one or more Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOS) to deliver early support and out of home care services.

While the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people coming into care appears to have slowed, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families continue to face barriers and challenges when they come into contact with statutory services, or their children are in care. *Our Booris, Our Way* provides a framework for ongoing work to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are supported well in community and by community and that families are diverted from statutory child protection services wherever possible and empowered to make their own decisions where statutory services become involved.

1. OUR BOORIS, OUR WAY *continued*

What we’ve heard

Feedback through the implementation of *A Step Up* and consultation undertaken through *Our Booris, Our Way* and the development of *Next Steps* has provided further insight into the continued challenges and priorities of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. Key insights include:

- we need to strengthen efforts in community led decision making and service design to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people
- drawing on the community’s knowledge we need to take a systemic approach to reducing the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in the statutory child protection and youth justice systems
- families need to feel safe to seek and access early support to keep their children safe and prevent escalation into crisis and culturally safe services need to be available
- ACCOs must have a greater role in the statutory child protection service system.

What we’ll do next

The work to implement all *Our Booris Our Way* recommendations will continue to be guided by the wholly Aboriginal and independent *Our Booris, Our Way* Implementation Oversight Committee. This work sits alongside *Next Steps* but must also be embedded within the strategy to ensure a broader focus on earlier supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families that is culturally safe, integrates service delivery and leads with self-determination as a core principle.

Early actions in the life of the strategy will include:

- fully embedding the five elements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle in legislation, policy and practice
- supporting the establishment of one or more ACCOs to deliver services and grow capability with a view to ultimately transitioning responsibility for a range of services including case management for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people

- ensuring all child and youth protection practice is culturally safe and leads with self-determination
- continued reform focusing on integrated, earlier support to keep Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families together and connected
- the establishment an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People Commissioner.

To reflect their central importance to the goals of the strategy and provide a key point of accountability, the following projects have been designated priority initiatives under this domain. They are:

The development of ACCOs and transition of responsibility for case management

The *Our Booris, Our Way* Review identifies the critical need for a strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled sector to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people growing up safely in their families and communities.

While the ACT has several established and emerging ACCOs—including Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health and Community Services and Gugan Gulwan Youth Aboriginal Corporation—the existing capacity in the community controlled sector to expand child welfare services is limited. To make progress against this initiative, further work is underway to support established and emerging community controlled organisations to take on an increasing role in the service system. This work will be done with a view to maturing the relationship between one or more community controlled organisations and the broader service system to enable the transition of responsibility for case management. Learning from other jurisdictions will be an important part of this work—particularly Victoria, where community controlled organisations have successfully taken on statutory responsibilities in child and youth protection.

1. OUR BOORIS, OUR WAY *continued*

As an early action to progress this, the government established a small team led by an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Executive with specialist expertise in strategic policy development, service design, establishment and implementation and the capacity to partner with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and across sectors. The next stage is bringing together the established and emerging ACCOs that work with families at risk of engagement with child and youth protection to build a joint understanding of each organisation's capabilities and interests and where further service development or partnerships are required.

There is also broader work underway within and across governments to strengthen Aboriginal community controlled sectors, which is aligned with this initiative. This includes work under the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap, the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement 2019–2028* and through ACT Government initiatives such as the New and Emerging Organisations (NEO) Grants program and the Healing and Reconciliation Fund.

Establish an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People Commissioner

The establishment of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People Commissioner is another key recommendation of the *Our Booris, Our Way* Review. Building on the examples of such Commissioners in other Australian jurisdictions, *Our Booris, Our Way* proposed a Commissioner with review and advocacy roles as well as powers to engage in the child protection system.

The work to establish the Commissioner is underway, being led by the Minister for Human Rights through the Justice and Community Safety Directorate. A co-design process has been conducted which focused on consideration of the Commissioner's functions, powers, physical location and a culturally appropriate recruitment process.

While the design of the Commissioner role is being finalised, an interim Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families Advocate is being appointed in the Justice and Community Safety Directorate. This will create an independent role focused on cultural safety and practice across child protection, youth justice and other areas and providing support for Aboriginal children, young people and families experiencing difficulties with these systems.

Once established the Commissioner will provide independent advocacy, engagement and oversight of the child protection system informed specifically by the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families. This will be key to ensuring we can achieve the ongoing improvements to the system that are necessary to eliminate the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

Fully embed the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle in legislation, policy and practice

This priority initiative is well underway and responds to Recommendation 5 from the *Our Booris, Our Way* Review. The ACT Government has engaged SNAICC National Voice for Our Children (SNAICC) to conduct culturally appropriate consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members and child and youth protection staff. This will establish a consensus view on the best ways to fully enshrine the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle into the *Children and Young People Act 2008* (CYP Act) and in policy and practice. Fully embedding the ATSCPP in legislation is also one element of our commitment to modernise the CYP Act and is further discussed under the domain of *Trust and transparency*.

SNAICC is due to submit a final report to the ACT Government in July 2022, outlining the views, insights and consensus gathered from consultations with the community and final advice on fully enshrining the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle into legislation.

2. TRUST AND TRANSPARENCY

There continues to be a power imbalance between people who work in the child and youth protection system (CYPS staff and out of home care providers) and those who become engaged with it (parents, carers, children and young people and their advocates and other services). This power dynamic is exacerbated by differing levels of access to information and knowledge—both about how the system works and what is driving individual interactions. Many people who engage with the system also lack trust that it will work in the interest of their family or children, particularly where engagement is intergenerational.

A Step Up included a focus on ensuring accountability through improved governance and regulation and established new services to increase advocacy for carers and families involved in the out of home care system. *Next Steps* aims to expand on this direction by putting trusted relationships between service users, government and partner agencies at the centre of the next stage of reform.

Progress to date

Key initiatives to improve support for and trusted relationships with, service users through the implementation of *A Step Up* and subsequent measures include:

- the development of the *Working Together For Kids* guides to provide clear and detailed information about how child and youth protection and out of home care processes work (www.communityservices.act.gov.au/ocyfs/children/child-and-youth-protection-services/working-together-for-kids)
- the establishment of the Australian Red Cross Birth Family Advocacy Support Service
- the establishment of a carers' advocacy service delivered by Carer's ACT
- funding for the CREATE Foundation to support children and young people
- the creation of a duty solicitor position in the Childrens Court to ensure families can get timely access to legal advice when matters come to court at short notice (for example,

when emergency action has been taken to remove a child or children)

- the establishment of a Disability Liaison Officer under the Disability Justice Strategy 2019–2029.

Despite our significant investments in training and services and continued oversight and reporting, it is clear more work is needed to increase transparency and ameliorate the ongoing power imbalance between the system and families, carers, children and young people. This is particularly apparent for marginalised groups who, for numerous reasons, are not able to access and participate in services on the same basis as others. This includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, parents with disability and people from culturally diverse backgrounds.

What we've heard

The consultations and engagement to support the development of *Next Steps* have provided additional clarity into the relationship between children, young people and families and the staff and agencies that comprise the child and youth protection system. Findings from these engagements and other reviews include:

- an acknowledgement children and young people must have a stronger voice in decision making to give full effect to their right to participate
- the roles and responsibilities in decision making need to be clearly defined and explained, so that the process can be transparent
- there needs to be more support for all parties (biological families, carers, children and young people) to be involved effectively in the decision making process
- everyone involved in out of home care should have the right to access independent advocacy and support in decision making and review processes
- internal and external decision review processes need to be strengthened to ensure they are timely, fair and transparent, with a clear focus on the best interests of children and young people.

2. TRUST AND TRANSPARENCY *continued*

What we'll do next

Building on the progress made and the lessons learned through the implementation of *A Step Up, Next Steps* will seek to improve the capacity of all elements of the system to build trusted relationships through:

- embedding restorative practice as the expected way of working in CYPS
- expanding birth family advocacy services
- funding services to provide support and advocacy for parents with a disability
- funding services to provide legal representation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families
- changing the form of service/support for carers in response to feedback
- reviewing the role of children's legal representative to clarify requirements of the role, including direct engagement with children and young people and their carers
- working with young people to review the language used across the child and young protection system to ensure it better reflects their lived experience of home, family and community connections
- engaging with and consulting children and young people in ways that enhance and benefit their care experience.

The following actions have also been identified as priority initiatives under this domain, reflecting their central importance to the goals of *Next Steps* and providing key points of accountability through its implementation:

Modernise the CYP Act to align with contemporary practice and support better information sharing

The CYP Act has been regularly amended in recent years, including two tranches of amendments to implement changes under *A Step Up*. However, the CYP Act now needs to be modernised to ensure it is easier for frontline workers to implement and that it is accessible for the community to understand and apply.

The work to modernise the CYP Act will be undertaken over the next two years and will build on evidence based frameworks and decision making tools for improving the wellbeing of children and young people and the delivery of positive child protection outcomes. This work will focus on embedding trust and accountability in child protection and youth justice systems and institutions, by improving transparency and efficacy of decision making mechanisms and adopting a co-design approach to the legislative reform.

Additionally, a range of reforms, including some of those outlined in *Next Steps*, will require amendment to the CYP Act. These include:

- raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility
- developing a model of external review of child protection decisions
- implementing a charter of rights for families involved in the child and youth protection system.

This work will ensure the government's significant reform agenda is able to be incorporated holistically and efficiently into the CYP Act.

Establish best practice internal and external decision review processes

In 2019, the ACT Government released a Discussion Paper: Review of child protection decisions in the ACT for public consultation. An independent consultant was contracted to review the submissions and identified three recurring themes:

- reforms to internal and external merit review systems need to be supported by consistent and strengthened CYPS practice
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, children and young people and parents with disability warrant particular attention in the design and implementation of any system of decision review
- advice and advocacy are needed in every part of the system and should be funded to ensure the efficacy of any system of decision review.

2. TRUST AND TRANSPARENCY *continued*

To progress this work, an independent consultant has been engaged to devise a model for an external merits review process appropriate for the ACT. The consultant is working with the Community Services Directorate, non-government partners and the community to develop options.

The project will propose options and recommendations for a model of external merits review of child protection decisions that aligns with internal processes and incorporates family led, trauma informed, strengths based, transparent and restorative approaches.

There is a concurrent project to embed improvements to internal decision making processes and implement practice reform. This will take a 'try, test and learn' implementation approach, with a new internal decision review process to be piloted for 12 months while continuous feedback is sought from affected parties and CYPS staff. This process is already underway and will include the establishment of an independent panel to make recommendations to the Director-General when a decision review is escalated.

Enshrine new Charters of Rights for Parents and Families and for Carers, building on the existing Charter of Rights for Children and Young People

The development of a Charter of Rights for Parents and Families and a Charter of Rights for Carers will create a clear, mutual point of reference for all participants in the system to understand what to expect. It will empower parents, families, carers and their advocates to challenge the system when they feel their rights are not being upheld.

Work to develop the Charter for Parents and Families is currently underway. The Community Services Directorate is developing easy to read consultation materials to guide consultation with community on drafting a Charter of Rights. The process will seek a diversity of perspectives to understand views about what rights are appropriate to include in the Charter, who should have access to these rights and how the Charter should be implemented. This work will acknowledge the paper published in 2014 by the Regulatory Institutions Network to develop a Charter of Rights and Responsibilities for Parents and Family Members in the Care of Child Protection Services in Australia (Hamilton and Braithwaite).



3. STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

‘Strengthening high risk families’ was one of the four domains under *A Step Up* and represented the intent to increase investment in early support and prevent children and young people entering out of home care. *Next Steps* reflects an evolution of the domain under *A Step Up*, recognising that the best outcomes for families will be achieved with a stronger focus on earlier support.

Next Steps will sharpen efforts on providing support for families to address risks and challenges while their children are very young, or as early as possible when problems emerge. *Next Steps* will operationalise the evolved understanding of early support and seek to deliver better outcomes for families before they become engaged with statutory child protection services. Whole-of-system integration will be essential to achieving this aim.

Progress to date

As a key domain under *A Step Up*, there has been significant investment and reform over recent years, including:

- the establishment of Uniting Children and Families ACT (Uniting) services to support preservation and restoration, particularly for families with very young children
- the use of longer-term funding options to support investment in evidence based service models, acknowledging that these take time to mature and establish but ultimately have greater success
- the establishment of a continuum of services, from when a family is identified as being at high risk of having a child come into care to prevent concerns from escalating, offering trauma informed models of care for children

and young people and providing opportunities for continued connection for young people transitioning from care at 18 years of age

- alignment with whole-of-government commitment to early support, including through the work of the following initiatives:
 - *Early Support: Changing Systems, Changing Lives* (Early Support)
 - *Set Up for Success: An Early Childhood Strategy for the ACT* (Set Up for Success)
 - the *Best Start for Canberra’s Children: the First 1,000 Days Framework Strategy* (First 1,000 Days).

The initiatives under *A Step Up* saw success in reducing the number of children entering care. However, there is continued recognition that early intervention should occur before children and families come to the attention of statutory child protection services.

What we’ve heard

Feedback through *A Step Up* and consultations in support of *Next Steps* have provided and clarified insights into this aspect of the ongoing reform journey, including:

- there is strong support for diverting families from statutory child protection and youth justice by providing early, intensive, strengths based and culturally safe family support, including prenatal support and father inclusive programs
- tailored support is needed to assist parents with a disability or mental illness to divert families from out of home care
- there is a need to build trust with biological families involved in the system so that they feel safe to seek help and access services.

3. STRENGTHENING FAMILIES *continued*

What we’ll do next

Continuing from the significant reform under *A Step Up*, *Next Steps* will focus on achieving:

- a strengthened interface between children and family services and services for:
 - drug and alcohol dependence
 - domestic and family violence
 - health (including mental health)
 - disability
 - education
 - justice
 - housing and homelessness
 - employment services
- increased access to pre-natal and early parenting support for parents at risk of engagement with child protection including parent-child interaction programs
- more work between child protection services and early learning services to better support children and families who may come into contact with statutory services
- increased access to therapeutic intervention and support for young children at risk of coming into care or in out of home care who are at risk of or experiencing developmental delay
- sustaining families through intensive family support, preservation and restoration support models, including targeted supports for families with older children and young people
- revising statutory child protection notification approaches with health and education agencies
- providing greater case management in family preservation
- expanding options to address repeated Child Concern notifications that do not meet the threshold for statutory child protection, including responses to potential cumulative harm
- delivering more evidence based parenting programs through Child and Family Centres with a focus on supporting families where there are risks of engagement with the statutory child protection system

- embedding family led decision making approaches, including increased use of Family Group Conferencing for all families where this is appropriate
- increasing and improving early Family Finding.

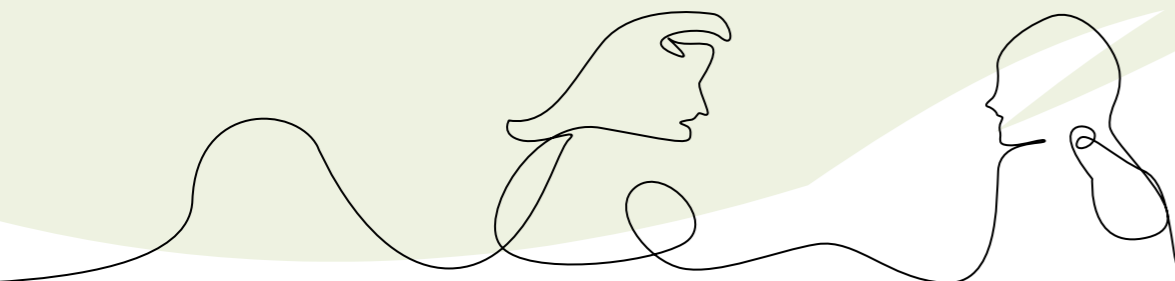
The following actions have been identified as priority initiatives under this domain, reflecting their central importance to the goals of *Next Steps* and providing a key point of accountability through its implementation:

Establish a wellbeing focused reporting process that improves early referral and access for families to natural and community based supports

There was unanimous agreement at the Child and Family Services Reform forum in March 2021 that more work needs to be done to support community based and universal services to connect with families in need. Statutory child protection services should always be seen as the last resort and early intervention offers the greatest outcomes in the long-term. To progress this, discussions are being held with community providers about how to best support families early in the life of a problem.

We are reviewing child protection intake and reporting process to see how people connecting with CYPS can more consistently be connected with services that sit outside the statutory system where appropriate. *Next Steps* will develop a service system that extends beyond the child protection system and aims to create a seamless and continuous service system for children, young people and families.

As we move forward with commissioning and co-design of services to support the implementation of *Next Steps*, flexibility will ensure services can best meet the needs of families and can provide support when difficulties emerge.



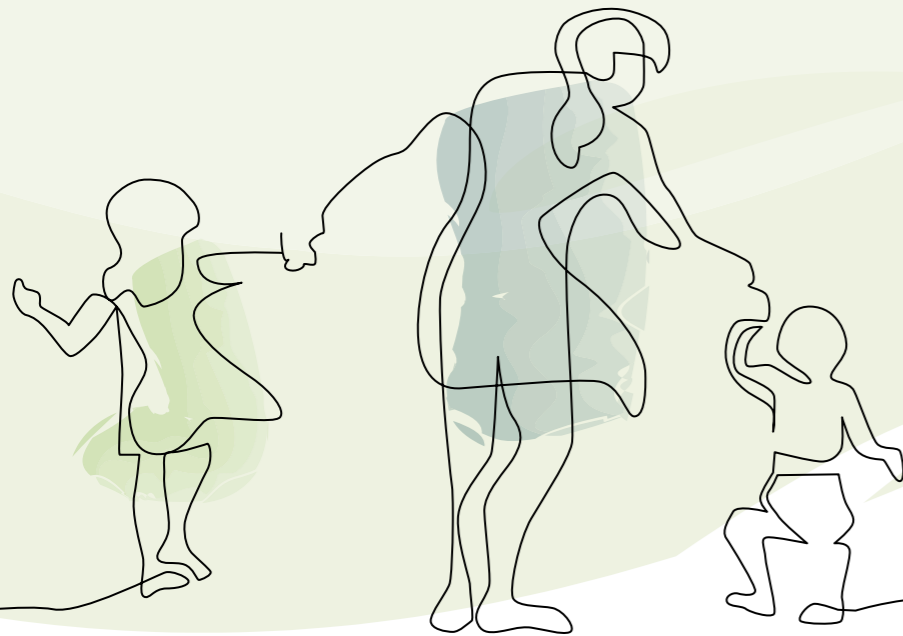
3. STRENGTHENING FAMILIES *continued*

Increase access to pre-natal and early parenting support for parents at risk of engagement with child protection

While there are several services available in the ACT to support expecting and new parents including antenatal care, parenting programs and advice, work is occurring collaboratively across ACT Government directorates, service users, non-government organisations and academics to develop better supports for families who are at risk of engagement with the child protection system. This will set families up with the best chance to succeed and connect them with services that will help them through their pregnancy.

Ensure commissioning for the Children Youth and Family Support Program supports better outcomes for families at risk.

CSD is currently developing the scope for the commissioning of the Children Youth and Family Support Program (CYFSP). Commissioning will include building an understanding the interface between CYFSP services and others in the system and clarifying services' role in providing early support to deliver better outcomes for those families at risk of involvement with the child and youth and protection system.



4. TRAUMA RESPONSIVE AND RESTORATIVE PRACTICE

Children and young people who come into contact with the child protection system are very likely to have experienced significant trauma and many have a background of multiple adverse childhood experiences. Addressing the specific needs of people who have experienced trauma, as well as appropriately responding to behaviours arising from that trauma, is central to the success of any child protection system.

Through *A Step Up*, we committed to building a therapeutic, trauma informed model of care as a pillar of the statutory child protection system. However, change of this scale takes time to embed and needs to be done in the context of emerging research into contemporary practices. The ACT has also committed to becoming a restorative city and there is much to be done to build and embed a restorative approach across the service system. Restorative practice recognises relationships between families and services are critical when attempting to effect sustained and positive change. This includes a shared approach to problem solving based on respect, accountability and support.

Next Steps acknowledges that the best outcomes are achieved when services work respectfully with families and carers to identify and achieve their goals rather than doing things to or for them.

Progress to date

Next Steps will build on the achievements of *A Step Up* and other recent work, including:

- the implementation of therapeutic assessments for children and young people in care
- the continuation of Melaleuca Place, a trauma recovery service for children from birth to 12 years
- the whole-of-government commitment to Canberra as a Restorative City and the work to embed restorative practice across many ACT Government services
- the establishment of a pilot Therapeutic Care Court in the Childrens Court for child and youth protection matters
- the commencement of the Warrumbul (Circle Sentencing) Court for young people.

Next Steps recognises that trauma continues to pervade the child and youth protection system. The implementation of therapeutic assessments, plans and supports for children and young people and training for carers and workers represent significant progress towards a trauma informed system. However, this is ongoing work and will require long term commitment to continue to weave in and embed restorative and trauma informed practice.

What we've heard

Engagement to inform *Next Steps* highlighted that the workforce needs to be supported in culturally responsive and trauma informed practice, to navigate the impact of complex environments experienced by the families they work with and to engage in more restorative decision making and case management.

We've also heard from carers about the vicarious trauma they experience in caring for children and young people with complex backgrounds, behaviours and family circumstances and about the impact of engagement with the system itself. Similarly, it is widely recognised that child and youth protection practitioners are regularly exposed to distressing material, complex situations, emotionally fraught decisions and difficult interactions that sometimes escalate to occupational violence.

What we'll do next

Initiatives under *Next Steps* will include:

- reconsidering how government and non-government providers do their work together, placing significant importance on relationships, including shared training, using evidence based relationship models and strong governance to facilitate shared accountability and responsibility
- improving internal decision review and complaints handling mechanisms with a focus on relationships and restorative principles
- implementing a new external decision review process to increase the ability for service users to challenge government decision making and to keep government accountable

4. TRAUMA RESPONSIVE AND RESTORATIVE PRACTICE *continued*

- building common assessment frameworks and tools between child and youth protection and non-government organisations working in the child, youth and family services sector to support referrals and information sharing
- improving Life Story Work to support children and young people, using restorative and trauma informed practice principles
- developing a trauma recovery response for young people 13+ years
- building on the pilot ACT Therapeutic Children's Court to establish less adversarial and a more restorative process for making child protection orders
- investing in contemporary training for
 - CYPS staff
 - non-government organisations
 - kinship carers
 - foster carers.

Some of this work is closely related to the *Trust and transparency* domain, particularly regarding improved processes for children, young people, families and carers. However, while the *Trust and transparency* domain is focused on systemic change, the actions under the *Trauma responsive and restorative practice* domain are aimed at changing the experiences of individual children, young people and families.

The following actions have been identified as priority initiatives under this domain, reflecting their central importance to the goals of *Next Steps* and providing a key point of accountability through its implementation:

Embed family led decision making, including Family Group Conferencing for all families where desired and appropriate

As part of *Next Steps*, opportunities to expand the range of activities to promote family led decision making will be explored. This will include continuing the delivery of Family Group Conferencing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and expanding availability of this pathway to all families.

Invest in training in restorative and trauma responsive approaches for child and youth protection workers and community partners

The role of a child and youth protection practitioner is difficult, challenging and often confronting. It is among the most complex and difficult work delivered by government. Frontline workers in our community partner agencies face similar challenges. To support CYPS workers, the Community Services Directorate provides a comprehensive training program to assist staff to manage the challenges of the work. *Next Steps* will build on this existing program with a focus on restorative and trauma responsive approaches. This training will benefit frontline workers while also ensuring that the intent of a therapeutic, restorative and trauma informed system is realised in their practice.

Establish an intensive trauma recovery service for adolescents and young adults

The government currently offers specialised therapeutic supports to children aged up to 12 years who are in out of home care arrangements through Melaleuca Place. This service consists of a highly skilled team of clinical psychologists, social workers, a speech pathologist, an occupational therapist and an operational support officer who help children to understand and work through their experiences of trauma.

With the increase in age profile and level of complexity of children and young people coming into contact with the child protection system, the need for intensive, specialised trauma recovery for children over the age of 12 has become increasingly apparent. Under *Next Steps*, a new service will be developed tailored to the needs of this cohort. This work is already underway in partnership between the Community Services Directorate and Health Directorate, recognising the service will be best able to prevent young people engaging with statutory systems if they can access early multi-disciplinary support in the community. Given the range and complexity of young people's needs, this service will be established using a 'try, test and learn' approach to allow the model of care to be refined in collaboration with young people and community partners.

5. PARTNERING WITH THE COMMUNITY

Non-government services across a range of sectors deliver services that support positive outcomes for children, young people and families engaged with or at risk of engagement with the statutory child and youth protection system.

We have heard from both families and service providers that the current service system is fragmented and pathways to access services can be onerous, confusing and do not deliver person centred care. *Next Steps* commits us to partnering with the community to develop and deliver an integrated service system that offers seamless support for families and carers in their community.

Progress to date

Key initiatives to support strong partnerships through *A Step Up* included:

- use of longer-term funding arrangements to support investment in evidence based service models that take time to mature and establish
- significant data analysis, capturing real changes for children, young people and families
- extensive baseline, mid and post strategy evaluations that have fed into the system along the way and strongly influenced the development of *Next Steps*.

What we've heard

In the context of the 'continuum of care' service model for out of home care, *A Step Up* has seen strengthened understanding of roles and responsibilities; sharing of information, risk and decision making; developing shared practices in data integrity, education, training and record keeping practices; and building on shared understandings and common goals. However, providers of child, youth and family services outside the continuum of out of home care established under *A Step Up* have not been closely engaged in this work.

More needs to be done to ensure all agencies and services that support the system use a shared language and common framework. This is vital for the effective operation of services and so that service users can feel connected and supported across the system. Services need to be built

utilising the expertise of parents, carers and young people with a lived experience of the system, to help improve service models, policies and procedures. Service delivery responses should be tailored to individual needs, enable user choice and include service partners and volunteers.

What we'll do next

Improving the way statutory services and community organisations work together in the ACT will take time and commitment. The fragmentation of the system, issues with information sharing and feedback and lack of a shared language and framework have created challenges with trust and understanding between the child and youth protection system and the non-government services that should be trusted partners. *Next Steps* will seek to address this through:

- support for service commissioning and co-production of services between government, service providers, service users and people with lived experience that uses evidence based models and can track and report outcomes
- a focus on integrated service delivery and partnered decision making
- clearly articulating the division of roles and responsibilities between government and non-government services and supporting shared accountability for outcomes
- delivering new funding models that allow flexibility to meet the needs of children and young people
- creating a more collaborative approach to system governance to see government and service providers working together more effectively to shape long-term reform and address immediate issues impacting on the effectiveness and efficiency of the system
- advancing data sovereignty for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- implementing a shared and linked performance management framework, evaluation framework and outcomes framework to identify areas of success and deficiency in the system

5. PARTNERING WITH THE COMMUNITY *continued*

- establishing a new Ministerial Council and enhancing the Strengthening Practice Committee to ensure better oversight and focus on practice and performance
- delivering more integrated training and professional development to build a professional, collegiate and supported workforce across the system
- strengthening contract management approaches
- building case analysis expertise
- investing in leadership, management, supervision and practice support
- improving information sharing, data development and analysis.

The following actions have been identified as priority initiatives under this domain, reflecting their central importance to the goals of *Next Steps* and providing a key point of accountability through its implementation:

Establish a new Ministerial Council that includes community partners and elevates the voices of people with lived experience

The March 2021 Child and Family Service Reform forum brought together key stakeholders to focus on the broad reform agenda underway in the way the government and community sector support children, young people and their families. A key consideration of the forum was the formation of a new Ministerial Council to guide government and create partnerships around reform.

Engagement with stakeholders has continued following the forum and will guide the establishment of an appropriately constituted and engaged Ministerial Council to partner with the government throughout the implementation of *Next Steps*. The inclusion of the voices of people with lived experience of the child and youth protection and out of home care systems is essential to successful reform and will be appropriately represented on this body. Importantly, the new Ministerial Council will have links with other implementation groups and use various engagement models to ensure people with lived experience and expertise are empowered to be involved at all levels.

Build common assessment frameworks and tools between child and youth protection services and non-government organisations working with children, young people and families

Robust processes to assess risk are fundamental to a well functioning child protection system. To support this, tools that guide and assist staff to make decisions have been implemented in some Australian jurisdictions, as explored further in the *Out of home care contemporary practice review* companion document.

The development of these tools can help to achieve consistency in decision making within CYPS. It also creates an opportunity to achieve a common understanding and consistency in decision making between government and non-government agencies.

Ensure all care services operate as Child Safe Organisations

Child Safe Organisations consciously and systematically create conditions that reduce the likelihood of harm occurring to children and young people, create conditions that increase the likelihood of any harm being discovered and respond appropriately to any disclosures, allegations and suspicions of harm. The *ACT Care and Protection Organisation Standards* (in particular Standard 5: Child Protection and Child Safety and Standard 12: Child Safe and Child Friendly Organisations) contain outcome indicators against which organisations are assessed for their compliance in providing a child safe and child friendly service and actively safeguarding the safety, welfare and wellbeing of children and young people.

To progress this work under *Next Steps*, we will work with young people with lived experience, carers, government and non-government agencies and staff and their representatives to refine the work of the regulator in assessing organisations.

6. CONTINUUM OF SUPPORT

Many children and young people in care are highly vulnerable due to the impact of abuse and neglect on their development and sense of self-worth. Transitions can often present periods of upheaval and increased uncertainty, compounding this vulnerability. Children and young people in out of home care require specialist services that can be stepped up and down depending on their needs and wishes.

Next Steps builds on the *Continuum of care* domain under *A Step Up* to embed a continuum of support. This domain will focus on ensuring smoother life transitions for children and young people within and exiting care. To achieve this intent, services need to include wraparound case management, specialist therapeutic residential care and the extension of support into early adulthood.

Progress to date

A Step Up established a continuum of services from the point at which a family is identified as being at high risk of coming into care to prevent and support concerns from escalating, offered trauma informed models of care for children and young people in care and provided opportunities for continued connection for young people transitioning from care at 18 years of age.

What we've heard

Engagement to inform the development of *Next Steps* has provided insight into the need for both earlier support for families—reflected in the *Strengthening families* domain—and greater focus on children and young people in care who are facing challenges and placing themselves and others at risk. In particular:

- there is significant support for innovative and flexible care options for children and young people that are based on their needs as these change over time
- there is strong agreement that the mental health of young people is a major concern and that this has been compounded by isolation and uncertainty associated with the COVID-19 pandemic

- there is a cohort of young people who are at high risk of exploitation and self harm who need intensive, coordinated and trauma informed support.

What we'll do next

Initiatives under *Next Steps* will include:

- ensuring children and young people have access to multiple mechanisms to support their engagement in decision making
- enabling young people to lead their transition planning
- greater support for life transitions within and from care
- further extending care for young people beyond 18 years
- strengthening family connection opportunities, including for sibling groups, based on best practice
- undertaking a review of supports for carers to identify gaps and barriers for access, including access to practical and wellbeing support for carers
- streamlining care approval processes
- commissioning of evidence based models of care including therapeutic residential care.

The following actions have also been identified as priority initiatives under this domain, reflecting their central importance to the goals of *Next Steps* and providing a key point of accountability through its implementation:

Extend the provision of care for young people up to 21 years of age

A Step Up included a commitment to extend the continuum of care subsidy payments for eligible care leavers up to their 21st birthday. Currently the Extended Continuum of Care offers support for young adults aged 18 up until they turn 21 and their carers by providing ongoing case management and financial support. After care support is available for care leavers until they turn 25. After care services can include a range of support related to education, health, wellbeing, accommodation and financial support.

6. CONTINUUM OF SUPPORT *continued*

There is significant effort across all Australian jurisdictions to improve support for young people transitioning from out of home care to independence at 18 years old and beyond, in recognition that these young people tend to have less access to continued informal family support than young people without a care experience. In developing *Next Steps* young people with experience of the current system advised they feel strongly about maintaining connections to family and community, as well as services and supports that can be flexible to meet their needs and aspirations. *Next Steps* will improve and extend the supports available to young people transitioning to independence from 18 until they turn 21. Young people will be able to opt out of post order support if they do not require or want to access this support after they turn 18.

Establish a multi-disciplinary intensive case management service for young people who are putting themselves and others at risk

Work in this area has not commenced and will be undertaken as a high priority under *Next Steps*. The detail of service development will be determined through consultation with stakeholders as part of co-design processes. This work will also support the ACT Government's commitment to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility.

Strengthen therapeutic residential care and models of support for young people with significant trauma behaviours

The directorate is in the process of engaging a nationally recognised and accredited provider of specialist therapeutic residential care services. Over time, it is envisaged these services will be delivered using a joint/hybrid government and non-government delivery model. In parallel, CSD has also been working on a service model which will continue to evolve through engagement with the new provider as well as co-design opportunities with service users and other key stakeholders.

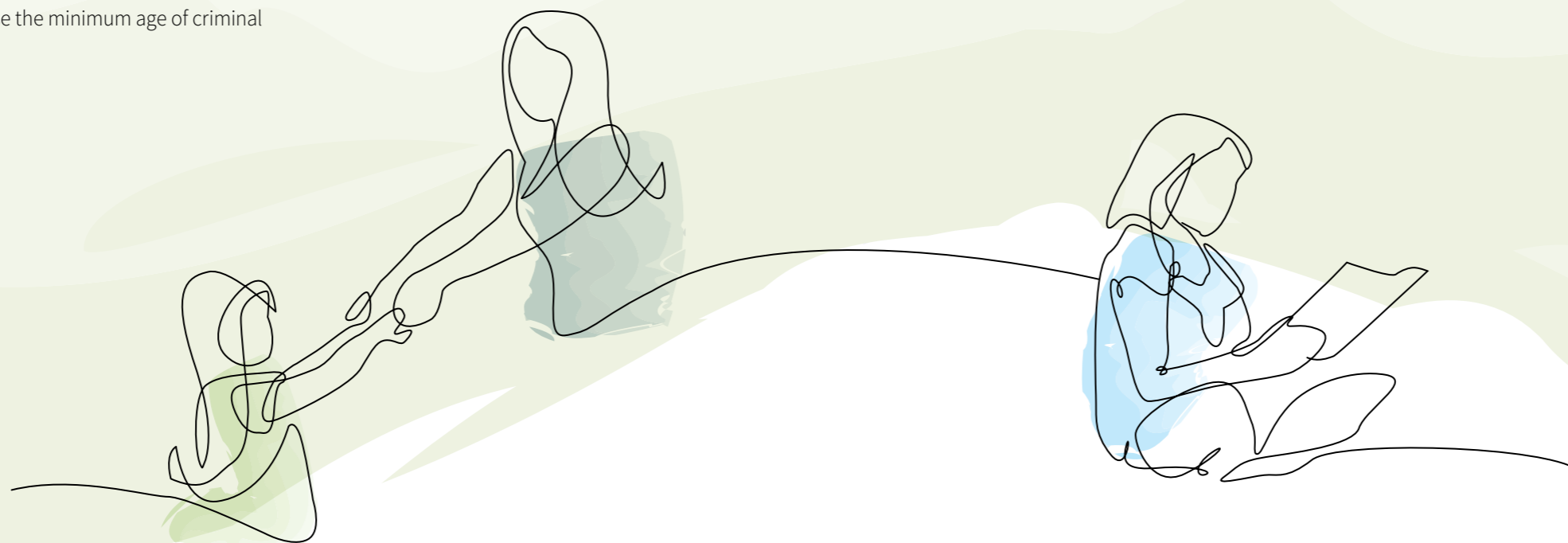
There are a range of models of therapeutic residential care services operating in Australia and internationally and these vary in terms of size and location, length of stay, restrictions, workforce, treatment goals, models of care and program philosophies. These models all reflect a widespread acceptance of the need to tailor residential care services, extending beyond the necessary trauma informed care to better meet the complex support needs of some children and young people.

Reporting progress and evaluation

A holistic performance management framework will be developed to measure progress and change being made in the lives of children, young people and families experiencing vulnerability. It will focus on shared accountability, building innovative approaches that improve outcomes for children and young people and a partnering approach to improve system efficacy and sustainability.

The greater focus on outcomes will drive improvements to service delivery, improved outcomes for children and young people and greater efficiency in the child protection, out of home care and youth justice systems.

An evaluation framework will be jointly established with community partners to ensure a culture characterised by innovation, continuous improvement and contemporary practices is embedded in everyday practice. This evaluation framework will be used to agree on priorities, measure performance and determine corrective action as required.



Conclusion

Next Steps is an ambitious plan for the next eight years of reform and investment in the child and youth protection system. It matures the existing service system developed under A Step Up for Our Kids. Next Steps has been developed using a sound evidence base, contemporary research and the direct feedback from people who have experienced the previous system and the impact of reforms.

Next Steps maps a reform agenda based on the vision that **Children and young people in the ACT are safe, strong, connected and living their best life.** Children, young people, families and carers remain at the centre of this reform effort, supported by an integrated and responsive service system.

Next Steps sets out the guiding principles to underpin the work of the reform and identifies the priority areas that will frame the co-design of action plans under the strategy. The Next Steps journey will be a multi-faceted one and will take time to implement. Working closely and partnering with stakeholders, the implementation of the reform will be delivered over three broad overlapping phases: Transitioning Phase for Years 1 and 2, Reform Rollout Phase for Years 2 to 5 and a Consolidation Phase for Years 5+.

As part of the transitioning phase there will be two key procurement programs of work: recommissioning services through extending existing service funding agreements; commissioning and procuring a new therapeutic residential care service in 2022; and commissioning new out of home care services in 2023.

In parallel to these programs of work we will be working with stakeholders on developing the detail of the new service system. The first co-designed action plan will be developed through the remainder of 2022. This will develop the operational framework and plan for how to move from the current to the future state. This will include a shift from a contract service/provider model to strategic partnerships with joint accountability and service delivery.

Next Steps is a strong plan for the future and will see lasting changes to the way we and our non-government partners, provide services to better support children, young people, families and carers.

